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The Presidency

Waves of Leaks and the Ship of State

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Jan. 24 — In the inexorable rhythms of political Washington, each new Administration reaches a time — as the Reagan Administration now has — when the President becomes alarmed or angered over news reports and orders a clampdown against leaks, in the name of national security, although officials concede that less exalted motives are often involved.

Lyndon B. Johnson gained a reputation for fuming over premature reports of impending high-level appointments or premature revelations that troop requests for Vietnam had touched off hot disputes among his advisers. In high dudgeon, he would order investigations, dress down Bill Moyers, his press secretary, and sometimes even reverse decisions he had made, just to prove the reports wrong.

Other Clampdowns of the Past

Richard M. Nixon authorized a program of wiretapping by the Federal Bureau of Investigation to close what he and his national security aide, Henry A. Kissinger, considered a leaky sieve of information after The New York Times disclosed the secret bombing of Cambodia in 1969. The Nixon Administration's fight in 1971 to halt publication of the Pentagon Papers, the Government's own history of the Vietnam War, produced a classic judicial test, though the papers included nothing about current Nixon policy.

Even Jimmy Carter, who had campaigned on pledges of greater openness in government, tried early in his Administration to dissuade The Washington Post from printing an article saying that the Central Intelligence Agency had funneled millions of dollars to King Hussein of Jordan. And nearly three years later, Mr. Carter instituted internal hunts and issued personal warnings that top officials would be dismissed unless they halted disclosures about how some officials felt that his support for the Shah of Iran was doomed to failure.

For President Reagan, the issue of leaks has just exploded into view. At his news conference last Tuesday, he joked amiably about them. "I was going to have an opening statement," he chirped, "but I decided that what I was going to say I wanted to get a lot of attention, so I'm going to leak it."

Typically, the President got a laugh. But aides say that Mr. Reagan himself has been anything but amused by the

the stuff he's been reading in the press," a White House aide acknowledged, "and when he got Bill Clark aboard as national security adviser, who is someone of like mind, he decided to do something about it."

As the President described it, he had approved new guidelines on public appearances, news contacts of national security officials and the use of lie detectors to try to stop disclosures that were "destructive to the foreign policy" and that "endangered delicate negotiations that were going on."

But several senior officials acknowledge that now, as in other Administrations, more than national security is involved. They say the President has been angered by reports on political appointments, economic trends and internal government debates that put pressure on him before he could reach key decisions. "The real villains," a senior official in another department complained, "are some of the President's own staff who put out stuff to try to influence his decisions."

The art of purposeful leaks aimed at affecting policy decisions or influencing public opinion is an integral part of bureaucratic infighting in Washington, practiced by the highest officials.

One technique for killing an opposing faction's pet project is to disclose it before it has Presidential approval or solid political support. Last summer Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger was forced by premature Air Force disclosures to backtrack on his tentative plan for basing MX missiles on large transport planes.

Another standard maneuver is to leak intelligence or economic estimates for shock effect in order to influence Presidential thinking or policy debate. Recently, senior White House and budget officials who back tax cuts in 1983 and 1984 gave reporters the Administration's private estimate that the budget deficit each year would run about $150 billion.

Presidents often feel hemmed in by advisers' maneuvers. White House aides confirm that Mr. Reagan was irked by New York Times reports Jan. 7 and 8 that some aides had calculated that a certain tax and budget-cut package would put the deficits on a downward trend from $95 billion in 1982 to $55 billion in 1984.

Damaging or Embarrassing?

Though Mr. Reagan had not flinched at leaks about appointments before, he was said to be upset by reports that he was planning two appointments sure to bother conservatives — Walter J. Stoessel Jr. as Deputy Secretary of

Senior officials acknowledge that such reports are a political embarrassment or irritation rather than a national security concern.

But they say it was diplomatically awkward to have The Washington Post report on Jan. 11 that the Administration had decided not to sell Taiwan advanced jets, before Taiwan and Peking had been officially informed. And they maintain that security interests were hurt by the New York Times disclosure about Libyan "hit squads" being dispatched to attack the President, publication in Aviation Week of photos revealing the high accuracy of American satellite cameras and other reports based on intelligence about the arrival of new Soviet aircraft in Cuba.

The news report that has so far set off the biggest furor, however, was a Washington Post report on Jan. 8 that top Pentagon officials were informed that it could cost up to $750 billion more to rearm this country than the Reagan Administration had budgeted for the next five years.

"That story has national security implications: giving aid and comfort to the enemy and giving a false and inaccurate picture," Mr. Weinberger contended. "It came from a document which has much more highly classified material in it and we believe the document is in unauthorized hands."

But other officials assert that because this was a raw, preliminary military "wish list," it was not so damaging to security as it was embarrassing to an Administration that contends that it is providing fully for the nation's military needs. They also note that when it suited Mr. Weinberger's purposes, he declassified estimates of Soviet military capabilities during the Pentagon budget debate.

Such complexities and the persistent disagreement over what constitutes a genuine breach of security leave some career officials less alarmed by the latest disclosures and less confident that the flow can be stopped than are the President and the top-level appointees who have a big political stake in his policies.

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